

Gathering the Waters
Rev. Diane Rollert
Unitarian Church of Montreal, 13 September 2009

Like tranquil streams we meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea...
Unitarian hymn, Marion Franklin Ham, 1933

As tranquil streams we meet and merge – well, maybe not all waters gathering together find it easy to flow into one source. They bump up against rocks. They collide over boulders. They experience cold, stinging rain – sometimes more often than they sparkle and dance in bright sunshine. They twist and turn on their way to the common source. And as we know, they don't always agree on the nature of the source, or if the source exists at all ... well, you get the metaphor. Yet they come together, despite all obstacles, and they are merged and transformed into something new, something greater than themselves.

This year, Labour Day came late, and we begin our services two days after the anniversary of September 11, 2001. Eight years and two days have gone by since it seemed as though the world had come crashing down. It is hard to believe that it has been eight years and two days since I was walking to the T in Boston (what we call the Metro here) and heard from a fellow commuter that a plane had flown into one of the towers at the World Trade Center in New York City. I was on my way to an orientation for new students at Harvard Divinity School. It was a first day on this journey into ministry. It was a major step on the path that would lead me here, to the Unitarian Church of Montreal.

By the time I reached the campus, another plane had struck the second tower. By the time we had gotten through the first set of presentations, another plane had struck the Pentagon. Dismissed from the regular programming, many of us gathered in a lounge at the Center for World Religions to watch the live coverage on a small TV screen. We watched in shock as the towers collapsed.

I knew those towers well. I had grown up knowing a New York without those towers and I had hated them when they were built. Their bizarre scale had dwarfed everything else, redefining the New York skyline. But then I had gotten used to them. They had become part of my life as I passed through the bowels of the towers every workday for more than three years. I had taken out-of-town visitors up to the observation deck. I had attended events in meeting rooms and restaurants on the highest floors. I had known people who worked there. Suddenly, impossibly, both towers were gone. The world had come crashing down.

I rushed home to be with my children. We went to church and cried with those who had family lost in New York, and friends on the planes that had originated in Boston. In the days that followed, we lived with fear blown all out of proportion. The ensuing response of my homeland would seem like a strange and forgettable farce, if it weren't for the invasion that followed and the wars that continue in Afghanistan

and Iraq. Yet on that day eight years ago, my fellow students and I felt we had been handed a great responsibility. It would fall to us to heal a very broken world.

Why am I going into this remembrance, on this day when we come together to celebrate our homecoming? This should be a warm-and-fuzzy-sermon day, right? Perhaps my mood is coloured not only by this anniversary, but also by my travels this summer, which brought me face-to-face with the complexity of this world we live in, especially when it comes to matters of faith. I return from a journey through Turkey as the guest of a Muslim group, followed by a journey to Transylvania, to one of the most important and very real cradles of early Unitarianism (as opposed to the very imaginary home of the fictional vampire Count Dracula!). There I gathered with Unitarians from literally all over the world – from Africa, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Eastern and Western Europe as well as Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada.

I have a lot of baggage to unpack in the months to come. So I offer you another watery metaphor, in these words from the ancient Lao-Tzu:

“Do you have the patience to wait until the mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?”

Perhaps some of our streams have travelled to that muddy place, where things have gotten complicated or confused. Isn't that life? I know I have spent a lot of time in rich, deep mud this summer and I'm still waiting for the water to become clear. I'm not complaining about the mud. You could say it was full of nutrients and felt good on the skin. Still, sometimes if you move too fast, the water just gets murkier. Yet how do you discern when the right action presents itself? How do you remain open and responsive, ready to see clearly, ready to take action?

What do I want to do with this ministry that has been my charge since the day the world came crashing down? Do I have patience? I look back at where we started last year, and you know, we accomplished a lot. We began to truly engage in our mission. We built a Caring Network that is really working. We began to thoughtfully engage our theological diversity. We began to reach out to the Muslim communities of Montreal. We collaborated with the Montreal Dialogue Group bringing together Jews, Christians, Muslims and Unitarians. We dared to talk about the two solitudes and the many solitudes that have divided us in language, in culture and in how we express our faith. We opened up our front garden, we added a bike rack, we put up a new sign, and I think the results are beautiful.

We're becoming less of a fortress and more like the bridge we dream to be – and we can't stop now. We've got to keep the momentum going. Last year I challenged you to think big and I extend that challenge again this year:

Our dreams and longings won't be fulfilled unless we grow. We have to grow, because this world needs us, not because of what we are already, but because of what we can become. Our mission is what we aspire to be: As a spiritual community, we welcome and nurture, we inspire and challenge, we take action in the world. We can't pat

ourselves on the back and tell ourselves our mission is already fulfilled, not yet, not ever. We've got to work to get there and then keep on working to stay there.

I'm still dreaming about healing this broken world. I see it beginning here by the building of community that truly welcomes diversity, of language, of class, of ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture and race, as well as theology. We have been taking small but steady steps in that direction, but we still have a long, long way to go.

I see it in the creation of an oasis in a troubled world where we can allow for a deeper understanding of what it means to be Unitarians and Universalists. We have much to learn from a rich history that goes back 500 years. Sometimes we forget about the importance and the responsibility of that legacy.

I am so pleased that the parents, teachers and friends of our children's religious education program have decided to focus on what it means to be Unitarian Universalists (UU and You). They told us, "Our children learn enough about other religions at school. We want them to know their own identity as UUs." I do believe, and I have always believed, that this is where we have to start, in our own backyard, with our youngest children.

I dream of our strengthening as a multigenerational community. I want to see us deepen our connections to the young adults here, where they can gather support, and have their voices heard. At the same time, I see us creating a place where our elders can truly share their life wisdom. There is so much that each generation can learn from each other. There are so many gifts we each bring, and we need to create a wider space for open sharing of those gifts. I also see us becoming stronger stewards of this place and this tradition, so that this community will still be here for generations to come – because it matters in the fabric of this unique city.

Finally, I see us taking action in the world and becoming a stronger social justice presence in Montreal, and in our movement. There are Unitarians around the world who hope to connect with us, and there are projects close to home that we can do together.

We don't know what will happen in the future. We wait with patience for the mud to settle and the water to become clear. This is a wild place, this city, this province, this country, this world. We go along quietly, living our individual lives and then change can happen and we will we need each other.

How glad I am to be back. How good it is to be with you, as we gather these waters into one source and begin again.